

Not Difficult, Not Easy

Stories from the lay lineage

Jacob Perl, JDPSN

(Adapted from a talk at Providence Zen Center in February, 1987)

Although we usually associate the transmission of Buddha's teachings with a lineage of monks, it is very interesting that in China, India, and Korea, we can always find someone who, while not a monk, shined brilliantly and inspires us still today. This is especially interesting in the West, where most of the dharma students are laypeople.

Historically, the Zen patriarchal tradition has been one of celibate monks. Our school is no exception. Culminating in Zen Master Seung Sahn, every teacher in this lineage has been a monk. Yet here, today, while we are certainly preserving that tradition, something else is emerging, a widening of what traditionally was the province of the celibate monk, of the hermit. It's not that this teaching was hidden from lay people in any way, but that in the past people who practiced really hard were expected, and willing, to give up any external ties and become monks.

In the India of Buddha's time, there was a very great teacher who was not a monk. His name was Vimalakirti. One of the great scriptures of Buddhism, the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra, is devoted entirely to his teaching. He was considered so brilliant and so sharp, and his dharma dialogues with others were so deep, that his contemporaries were afraid to engage him in dharma combat. Even Buddha's greatest disciples, such as Manjushri and Mañḍalyāna, were in awe of him.

Tradition has it that Vimalakirti was very sick one day, and the Buddha asked his disciples to visit him. Led by Manjushri, who was foremost among the disciples, they

came to Vimalakirti's house. The discussion went somewhat like this:

Vimalakirti: "Ah, welcome. I see that you have come, but you are not showing a sign of coming."

Manjushri: "Yes, indeed."

It was a kind of a metaphysical talk which was very popular in those days. After this discussion went on

for some time, Vimalakirti changed the tempo by asking all the guests, "What is the law of entering the gate of Not Two?" In turn each gave a short discourse.

Manjushri spoke last, saying "This entering of the gate of Not Two is something that cannot be said. There, there is no name, no form. It cannot be expressed in any way." He asked, "Now, you, Vimalakirti, please give us your understanding of entering the gate of Not Two." Vimalakirti only sat in silence. Manjushri recognized this silence and said, "Wonderful! That indeed is the true gate of Not Two!"

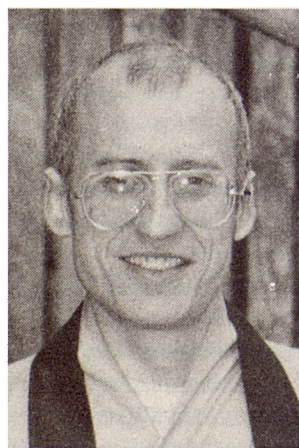
Most of the stories that we have from those days are about great monks. It's very instructive to hear a story about a person who used a different way of life to teach others.

In China, there were several great laypeople. Perhaps the most notable was Layman P'ang and his family. It is said that each of them was enlightened. His daughter was said to be especially brilliant. Although she was the youngest member of the family, she was very sharp and had a way of having the last word.

One day, the Layman, musing on life and practice, uttered these words of wisdom: "Oh, difficult, difficult, difficult! It's like trying to scatter ten thousand sesame seeds over a tree." The wife right away retorted, "Oh, easy, easy, easy! It's like touching your feet to the ground when you get off the bed." The daughter was not to be outdone. Immediately she commented, "Not difficult, not easy! On the tips of ten thousand grasses, the patriarchs' meaning." What kind of patriarchs' meaning can we find on the tips of grass? If you find that, you will get the true dharma eye. That this wonderful family managed to keep the vitality of the dharma in their busy lives is very important. Such examples are priceless.

In Korea, the story of Sul is very famous. She was born to a devout family of Buddhists. Her father was a very strong practitioner and the little daughter loved to chant with him. She would often accompany him on visits to great Zen Masters, including her father's teacher. One day, this teacher said to her, "I have heard that you are practicing very hard, so I want to give you a present. This present is the words 'Kwan Seum Bosal.' Repeat these words all the time, then you will get great happiness."

All the time that she could, she recited the mantra "Kwan Seum Bosal." One day, as she was chanting



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Kwan Seum Bosal in her room, she heard the sound of a temple bell and her mind opened up. She understood that she and Kwan Seum Bosal are the same. Everything is Kwan Seum Bosal.

She became very happy, but also a little bit wild. She no longer chanted "Kwan Seum Bosal" and was seen talking to trees and plants. One day, as her father came into her room, he noticed that a sutra book he had given her was not on the altar, but underneath Sul, who used it to prop up her meditation cushion. The father became furious, and said, "How dare you sit on this scripture! How dare you defile the truth?" The little girl turned to him and said, "Father, do you think the truth is contained in words?" Seeing his confusion, Sul said, "Please ask your teacher."

The father told his teacher about Sul. "Is my daughter going crazy?" he asked. The teacher replied, "Your daughter's not crazy. You're crazy!" Then the Zen Master said, "Don't worry!" He wrote a poem for Sul:

*When you hear a wooden chicken crow in the evening,
You will understand the country where your mind is born.
Outside the door of my house,
The willow is green, the flower is red.*

When Sul read the poem she said "Ahah. So the Zen Master is also just like this." Then she took the scripture from the floor, dusted it off, put it on the altar, and behaved quite normally from then on.

In time Sul became a wife and mother, and eventually had many grandchildren. She became known as a great Zen Master. Although she didn't wear special robes, she was so clear and practiced so hard that her daily life, her everyday speech, helped many people. After one of her granddaughters died, Sul was very, very sad; she cried and cried. The people around her were shocked because of her reputation as a great Zen Master. Someone asked, "You already understand that there is no life or death. Why are you crying for your granddaughter?" Then Sul cried even harder, and said "You don't understand! Because I cry, my granddaughter can enter into nirvana." She was quite extraordinary.

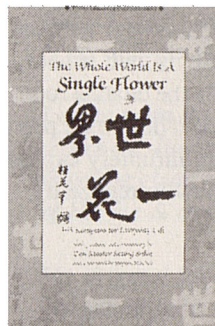
What do these stories mean for us? Sometimes we tend to check ourselves, our practice, our life. We try to make one practice better, more high class, another practice low class. Or we check ourselves in the sense, "Am I good, or am I bad? Am I as committed as I should be, or should I do something different?" Sometimes we attach to the outer form of practice. The reason these kinds of out-

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The Whole World is a Single Flower

365 Kong-ans for Everyday Life

Zen Master Seung Sahn



One of the most distinctive qualities of the 365 Kong-ans is its ecumenicism. (Zen Master Seung Sahn) has included not only kong-ans from Chinese and Korean Zen, but also from Lao-tzu and the Christian tradition."

— from the foreword by Stephen Mitchell

- The first collection by a prominent Zen Master to include Christian kong-ans
- Includes a preface by Brother Benjamin of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky

Kong-an, or koan, means public document. Many years ago in China, whenever government documents were copied, a seal was imprinted on the copy so that half of the seal remained on the original document and half on the copy. In order to verify that the copy was authentic, the two halves of the seal were matched. In the Zen tradition, kong-ans are used the same way: the student's understanding is one half and matches the teacher's understanding, which is the other half. When the student and teacher share the same understanding, it is called "transmission from mind to mind."

Zen Master Seung Sahn provides us with kong-ans which are practice for life—practice for answering the questions which are both profound and practical arising every day. How does truth function correctly? How do you make your life correct? Zen means when you are doing something, just do it. This collection of kong-ans contains beautiful words that teach correct direction.

Charles E. Tuttle Company, March 1992

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standing people are important is that they show us very clearly that this practice is not dependent on our appearance. It's not dependent on our way of life. This practice simply means clarity. Our everyday clarity. What are you doing right now, this moment? If you are monk, you have monk's job; if a lay person, you have lay person's job. Keep your correct situation, whatever it is. Moment after moment, keep the great question, "What is this?"

Question: Do you have any famous layperson stories from the present day?

JP: Yes! Nowadays there is a very great story, and it is taking place even as we talk. It is the most important story of all. Everyone must attain this story, become a true Vimalakirti, or Layman P'ang, or Sul. This very moment is that story. So, everyone here is a famous lay person!

Jacob Perl, JDPSN is abbot of the international Kwan Um School of Zen, president of the Kwan Um School of Zen of Europe, and guiding teacher of Providence Zen Center. □

Dharma Mirror update

available March 1 to purchasers of that manual. The update covers requirements to take each category of precepts, plus several clarifications of practice forms. To receive the update, send \$2 to *Dharma Mirror*, Kwan Um School of Zen, 528 Pound Road, Cumberland RI 02864 U.S.A.

Condolences

to the family and friends of Leo Pruden, a respected scholar of Buddhism, who died in October in Los Angeles after a long illness. He was 53. Dr. Pruden was a friend of the Kwan Um School of Zen sangha from its earliest days. While a professor at Brown University in the 1970's, he translated many of Zen Master Seung Sahn's dharma talks from Japanese into English.

Letter to the editor

Dear Kwan Um School of Zen sangha (c/o Primary Point editor),

I am writing this open letter to the entire sangha to express something that troubles me about our school. I write in order to start a dialogue, or to extend any existing dialogue schoolwide. I initially sent this letter before Jane McLaughlin was made a Ji Do Poep Sa Nim, so that happy occasion does alleviate some of my concern, but not altogether.

What concerns me is the fact that of twelve Ji Do Poep Sa Nims, there are only two women, and during the twelve years between the inka ceremonies for Barbara Rhodes, JDPSN and McLaughlin PSN, only men have been acknowledged as able to provide the kind of teaching that is a cornerstone of this school. How can this be? In our center in Tallahassee, Florida, often more women come to practice than men, and I assume that most centers have plenty of female members. Why aren't women "making the grade" as teachers?

This whole question bubbled into my awareness in a peer counseling training class in which participants were asked to look deeply within and identify an area in which we felt blocked. What I uncovered was an internalized feeling of unworthiness as a female practitioner in a historically patriarchal religion. But while I could chalk up the invisibility of women in the Zen tradition to historical oppression, I couldn't so easily rationalize away the near-invisibility of women among the Ji Do Poep Sa Nims in our school.

What I saw in myself was a deep feeling of demoralization, a resigned despondency about the capacity of women to realize our true natures. I wondered if we are simply not up to par with men, perhaps because we focus too much on raising our children rather than sitting lots of retreats. I worked with this demoralization during the ensuing weeks, talking with others and just sitting with it. I have come to see that women are not less equipped than men—after all, raising children is practice, just as sitting retreats is, depending on the mind you bring to it. Something else is going on and I wonder if it is being looked at.

Somehow the capacities of individual women are being overlooked. (I don't know how Ji Do Poep Sa Nims are selected—whether Zen Master Seung Sahn controls the whole process or whether existing Ji Do Poep Sa Nims are integral to the process or what.) Acknowledgement of McLaughlin PSN as a teacher encourages me. Nevertheless, it is hard for me to believe that so few women in the Kwan Um School of Zen are capable of doing kong-an practice with students. And if this is so, why? Can we begin a school-wide dialogue on this?

This process of questioning has been valuable for me because it uncovered a kind of insidious self-doubt that was quietly binding me. And it seems that paying attention to it has dissolved much of it. If there are other women who experience this, I hope this letter will help bring it to your awareness so that you can let it wither away or begin to address it. I hope it is recognized that the absence of women teachers can be demoralizing to women students, and that it surely perpetuates unfair attitudes about gender among members of our school. If anyone has comments on this letter, I'd love to hear from you.

In the dharma,
Ellen B. Gwynn
Tallahassee, Florida